

Was It Really a Dream?

In the evening, sprawled in front of the TV in the front room of the cabin, the Hartley family gathered to view a Harry Potter movie they had brought with them.

Will lay on the floor, his head and neck propped against the convertible sofa that would later be his bed. Annie was sprawled on a brown stuffed bean bag that nearly swallowed her up as she snuggled in it to watch the movie. Halfway through *The Chamber of Secrets*, Will fell asleep, snoring. It didn't matter, really. They'd all seen the movie several times before. Annie and her parents stuck with it until the familiar ending.

After that, they opened the sofa bed and Will rolled onto it, as his mother brought out an extra pillow from their bedroom. Annie, still wired from the day's excitement, headed to the small room at the back of the cabin that was her bedroom. She didn't like to sleep in a closed space, so she left her window slightly open, letting in the cold mountain air and the sound of trees rustling. Sitting for a time on the edge of her bed, her elbows propped on the windowsill, she gazed at the moonlit landscape outside. It was so calm and peaceful, really. Why had it seemed so frightening at the top of the mountain?

She climbed into bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. There, she lay awake for a long time. She couldn't stop thinking about the mysterious house and the trip she and Will had made up the mountain. And what should she make of the deer who had accompanied them along the way? Their brown eyes, watching and knowing...knowing what?

As she began to drift to sleep, images from the afternoon filled her dream. She was back up at the top of the mountain, standing in the clearing in front of the house. Three deer watched from a copse of trees. And then she was back in the cabin again.

Halfway between sleep and wakefulness, she heard a tapping sound coming from outside the open window. She pulled a pillow over her head to muffle the noise, but the tapping continued, even louder. She couldn't escape it, so she got up and looked out the window to the ground below.

There, gazing quietly back at her were the two big-eared fawns she had seen on the mountain.

"Come help us," a voice said, not aloud but in Annie's head.

"How?" Annie replied, and the minute she said it, she was outside with the deer.

"Who are you?" she asked.

They said nothing. They just stared back at her with puzzled looks.

“Can you understand me?” she asked.

One of the fawns looked like it was about to speak but stopped. Then the deer were gone. And Annie was back in her bed. She buried her head in her pillow, and she could feel her heart pounding. What was happening to her? If this was a dream, she had never had one that was so strange and vivid.

She sat up and looked around, trying to see something familiar in the darkness. It was pitch black in her room, although the moon still shone on the landscape outside. Scratching and skittering sounds came from beneath the cabin, probably from small animals foraging in the night. It was too much for her. She pulled her pillow over her ears and closed her eyes tight. Exhausted, she fell asleep.

The next morning, she shuffled out to the kitchen, groggy and half awake. Will, sitting at the breakfast table, was already dressed for the day, although as usual his hair was uncombed and messy. Hunched over his bowl of Cheerios, he looked up when Annie plopped down in a chair opposite him at the table with her own bowl of Frosted Flakes and a glass of orange juice.

They didn't talk much. Will was always quiet in the morning, so Annie gazed out the window at the town she could see down in the valley, frowning as she tried to make sense of what had happened to her overnight.

Finally, scooping up a spoonful of cereal, Will glanced at Annie, careful to assess her mood before he spoke.

“How did you sleep?”

“Not very well. I had a strange dream.”

“About what?”

“We were at the top of the mountain. And the house was there.”

Will looked at her, the spoon he was holding suspended midway between the cereal bowl and his mouth.

“The deer were there too,” Will prompted. “And then a couple of them were here—at the cabin.”

Annie looked back at him. “You won't believe what else happened.”

“Don't tell me,” he said. “I know. You heard one of them speak.”

They stared open-mouthed at each other. They had had the same dream.

Will lifted the bowl to his mouth and slurped its contents before he put it back on the table. He wiped milk from his chin and held his finger to his mouth, signaling to his sister. “ Shhh.”

It was only a dream about animals they had seen on the mountain, but it was too disturbing and real. Why had it come to both of them on the same night? This was scary in a way that they couldn’t explain, not to anyone, and especially not to their parents. What to do next was clear, however. There would be no sitting on the deck this morning.

They glanced over at their father, sitting in the area next to the kitchen that was set aside for lounging.

“Dad, we’re going back up the mountain again, to see what’s at the top,” Will said. “Is that o.k.?”

Wearing a rumpled sweatshirt and jeans, his hair spiked and unkempt, just like Will’s, their father sprawled on the sofa, engrossed in a book on the history of the nearby town. He turned a page and looked up just long enough to mumble.

“Mmmph. Just don’t be gone too long.”

Whether or not he had heard them wasn’t clear. But at least he hadn’t told them they couldn’t do what they were planning to do.

Their mom was likely to be a harder sell. She actually listened to them most of the time. She was cleaning up after breakfast.

“Mom—we’re going to take another hike in the woods—up the mountain behind us.”

Evelyn Hartley looked at them and smiled. She was an older image of her children—a blend of the two. She was tall and slender like Will, but she had Annie’s sandy hair and blue eyes. And, like Annie, she loved to explore. She knew how it felt, always to be on the lookout for adventure. But she also knew how impulsive her daughter could be.

“I want you to promise me that, if you run into anything that doesn’t look safe, you will turn around and come back here immediately.”

“We will Mom. We promise.”

“Well then, have fun. But be back for lunch. Don’t stay up there as long as you did yesterday.” Mission approved, Will and Annie darted out the front door, stopping just long enough to grab the backpacks they had brought with them, filled with first-aid kits, water, and granola bars. Once outside the cabin, they followed the trail they knew would take them to the top of the ridge.

This morning, the path was familiar and dry, and the sun was shining brightly. With better climbing conditions, they easily reached the clearing they had found the day before. There, where it had not been the day before, was the strange house they had seen from the deck of their cabin.

It wasn't at all impressive up close. The paint on its siding was gray and cracked in places. On several of the windows at the front of the house, the shutters hung loose, flapping in the light wind that was blowing across the ridge. It was two stories tall. An expansive porch ran across the entire length of the house, framed by fluted columns.

There may have been a time when it was a showcase of sorts, but no more. Now, all that was left of that elegance were hints of what used to be. The place looked almost forlorn. Clearly no one lived there now, and probably hadn't for some time.

"I want to go inside," Annie said to Will. "There doesn't seem to be anyone around who would mind."

"Uh...Annie, this is somebody's house. We shouldn't just barge in like we own the place." Will chewed on his lower lip and looked around. "Let's just peek in the windows."

"Will, you are so lame! There's nobody here. And we aren't going to be here long."

"This is somebody's house. Private property!"

Annie was already running toward the front steps, bounding up them two at a time. Will held back for a few seconds, looking from left to right, chewing on his lip even more. Looking down at the ground at first, he scuffed his shoes in the loose rocks that were scattered on the approach to the house. Then he sighed and hurried after his sister.

The front door was solid oak, with two small leaded glass windows. Annie grabbed the large brass doorknob. It didn't turn easily at all, but she kept twisting it. When she leaned her shoulder into the door and pushed against it, she could feel it begin to budge.

"Come on and help me, Will. I think we might be able to get it open."

Will hesitated, watching as Annie kept pushing against the door with her shoulder.

"Ooof! I can feel it start to move."

The aged wood of the door frame gave way with a snap and the door swung open, revealing a small entryway. In the background, a curving staircase led to a second floor.

“Omigosh. Look what we’ve done!” Will stepped back, refusing to go inside the house that was now open but not actually inviting them, at least not in his eyes.

Annie stepped across the threshold and peered around. The musty smell of dust and mold that greeted her in the entryway confirmed her suspicion that it had been closed for a very long time.

Looking back at the trees they had passed through on their way up the mountain, Will thought for a minute about heading back to the cabin. “If you run into anything that makes you feel unsafe, turn around and come back immediately,” their mother had told them. Well, that’s exactly what he was feeling right now. But he couldn’t—wouldn’t—leave Annie here by herself. So he slowly followed his sister into the house. And sneezed. Then he sneezed again.

“You know I’m allergic to dust,” he said in a loud whisper. “I can’t stay here very long.”

“Well then, stay close to the door. There’s fresh air coming in there.”

With Will pinned in the entry hall, Annie tiptoed into the room that lay to her left.

“Omigosh. This is incredible.”

It was a grand library, taking up the length of the front on the left side of the house, and extending almost all the way to the back. Squinting in the dim light that filtered through the partially shuttered windows, Annie could see floor-to-ceiling bookcases filled with volumes in all shapes and sizes. The furniture, arranged mainly in the center of the room, was draped with white sheets—ghostly protection against dust and any insects that found their way into the house through the fireplace that took up almost half of the wall at the end of the room. The bookcases were pine, and the floors were oak. The entire room was a picture of permanence, stability and strength.

"Look at this. The fireplace is huge. Big enough that I can stand inside it."

Huge didn’t even begin to describe the fireplace. Monumental. Massive. Made entirely of granite rocks that had probably been taken from the mountain outside, it had a cavernous opening blackened with soot. A large set of andirons stood to the side, but there was no screen in front of the grate that now held the ashes of long-dead fires. A large stone lion’s head embellished the top of the curved opening of the fireplace. On a side wall hung a mounted, stuffed head of a male deer with enormous antlers.

Annie was looking up the chimney when Will finally decided to follow her into the library.

“There’s no opening,” she said, standing in the fireplace and looking up.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean there is no opening in the chimney. It’s been covered up. Or stopped up with something.”

“That isn’t possible. There couldn’t be any fires in there. The smoke would back up and fill up the room.”

“So come here and take a look! Honestly, you never believe me.”

Will stepped into the mouth of the fireplace and gazed upward. Annie was right. The opening to the chimney was clogged with twigs and some sort of overgrown plant that had taken up root inside it.

A sharp popping sound startled them, followed by an acrid smell and a tingling, prickly sensation that overcame both of them. The hair on their heads began to stand on end.

“Can you feel that? It’s like electricity—some sort of energy,” Will said in a shaky voice.

Annie said nothing. Her eyes and her mouth were open wide. She grabbed her brother’s hand. The house began to vibrate. As it did, the sheets covering the furniture in the living room fluttered and danced and the bookcases began to sway.

“Wh...h...a..t’s happening?” Annie whispered.

“I don’t know but we’re getting out of here. NOW!”

They stumbled back across the living room, through the entry hall and out the front door onto the porch. The shuddering and shaking grew worse, accompanied by a loud rumble. Gathering their strength, they leaped off the front porch and rolled onto the ground just beyond the front steps—or where the front steps had just been. They scrambled toward each other and looked back.

“Omigosh, omigosh. Can you see...?”

“Yeah, but I don’t believe it.”

The house was gone.

